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SUBJECT: CZECH FM ON IRAQ, VISAS AND DOMESTIC POLITICS

REF: STATE 11182

Classified By: Political Officer Kimberly C. Krhounek for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. The Ambassador met with Czech FM Cyril Svoboda on June 27 primarily to discuss an extension of the Czech military police unit in Iraq through 2006 (UN reform issues covered septel). Svoboda said that the GOCR intended to ask the parliament to extend the troop deployment this fall and he believed the request would have solid support in both chambers, despite the possibility of the issue getting caught up in early posturing for the June 2006 parliamentary elections. The two also discussed the work of the Bilateral Consular Working Group (BCWG) and the status of relocation of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and Svoboda provided his views on potential new political configurations after the next elections. End summary.

FUTURE OF COALITION IN IRAQ

12. (C) Svoboda was very receptive to the Ambassador's request to extend the Czech military police presence in Iraq through 2006. Svoboda stressed that it was necessary for the coalition allies to remain in Iraq until the new government can take over the security situation. He said that current Defense Minister Kuehnl, new PM Paroubek and he all support the extension and that in general a solid majority in both chambers of parliament do so as well. He added that he was pleased with the position of new PM Jiri Paroubek, who after a trip to London stated, "We will stay in Iraq." The one difficulty that Svoboda warned about was that the atmosphere in the parliament would likely be charged with the upcoming parliamentary elections, which will take place in June 2006. Some of the left wing members of the governing coalition could be against an extension of the mandate as part of the pre-election political positioning.

13. (C) The Ambassador thanked Svoboda for his support as well as that of the government as a whole, stating that the strong stance taken by the Czechs encourages other coalition members to remain firm as well. He also praised Svoboda's personal support as particularly critical to the long-term commitment of the Czechs, as Svoboda has been integral to keeping the GOCR on track in Iraq, throughout the political upheaval of the past year which brought about several changes of Prime Minister, Defense Minister and other cabinet positions. Svoboda reaffirmed his staunch support for reconstruction of Iraq, stating that Israel is currently the only democracy in the Middle East and that now is the window of opportunity to make a difference in Iraq. Svoboda attended the recent conference on Iraq in Brussels and was pleased with the meetings and with the extensive attendance of more than 80 countries, including all of Iraq's immediate neighbors in the region.

VISAS AND EXPIRED PASSPORTS

14. (C) The Ambassador praised the work of the Bilateral Consular Working Group, noting that the most recent meeting on June 1 was productive and that a couple of sub-working groups had been established to work on the specific issues of the Czech introduction of a biometric passport and on overstay rates and assumptions. Svoboda was pleased that the issue of new EU member states joining the Visa Waiver Program was discussed at the June 20 U.S.- EU summit in Washington. He added that while this issue is still politically a "hot potato," it is helpful and important to see signs of progress. The Ambassador agreed and noted that Washington was focusing discussion on various aspects of U.S. visa policy. The Ambassador also took the opportunity to once again urge the Czech government to allow its citizens to keep expired passports that had valid U.S. visas in them. Some 25 percent of the current Consular Section workload comes from the current MOI practice of retaining expired passports, requiring Czech citizens to obtain new visas anytime they obtain a new passport. It would save both sides time and money if the Ministry of Interior would simply cancel the expired passports and return them to their owners with the valid visas intact, as is the practice in the U.S. and most

of the EU. Svoboda acknowledged the problem, but said that any change in the Czech practice would necessitate a change in one of the existing laws.

WHEELING AND DEALING IN CZECH POLITICS

15. (C) The Ambassador took the opportunity to ask Svoboda his opinions about the new government under PM Jiri Paroubek. Svoboda answered quite frankly that, "Paroubek has one plan now, to be in power after the next elections. He will make a deal with anyone." Svoboda added that Paroubek was getting stronger and said that he believed Paroubek could restore CSSD to its previous level of 25 percent voter support. However, he added that Paroubek's "flexibility" was "dangerous" since he believed the PM would form a coalition with anyone, including the Communist party if they would make a few changes. He could also envision a scenario in which the leftist CSSD would willingly again form a grand coalition with the Civic Democrats (ODS), the largest party on the right. This is a problem for Svoboda's party, the Christian Democrats (KDU-CSL), which views itself as the logical coalition partner for ODS. He noted that for a center-right coalition to form, it would require that KDU-CSL gain approximately 25 seats in parliament, while the Civic Democrats would need another 80 seats. This is difficult to achieve, and may make ODS look more favorably on forming a "grand coalition" with the Paroubek's Social Democrats if they think their voters would accept it (NOTE: There was a previous grand coalition between ODS and CSSD from 1998-2002, which is commonly described as a period of increased corruption and non-transparent political deal-making).

16. (C) Svoboda expressed disappointment that the credibility of his party, KDU-CSL, had been "nearly destroyed" as a coalition partner. Since it had been in government with parties on both the right and the left, it was a convenient scapegoat and had been accused of betraying its coalition partners on all sides. This made the current situation very difficult for the party as it strategized on possible government formations in 2006.

RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO LIBERTY

17. (C) Finally, the Ambassador touched briefly on the progress made to date in efforts to relocate Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty to a more secure location in Prague. He informed Svoboda that RFE/RL and the State Department's OBO office completed the final report earlier this month, recommending that RFE/RL accept the final offer made by the Orco property group to build a new facility in Prague 10. RFE/RL's deadline to accept this offer is July 31, and it has already circulated the report to both its supervisory board (the Broadcasting Board of Governors) and OMB and received their approvals. The report is now with the relevant authorizing and appropriations committees of Congress and we are hopeful that the final approvals will be received shortly. Once the contract is signed, we will use our Embassy's good offices to meet with city officials and try to expedite the planning and construction permits, and we hope to have the support of the MFA as well. Svoboda assured us that he would do anything in his power to assist us in the project.

18. (C) Comment. Svoboda was very relaxed and open in this meeting and he appears to have survived the various political machinations of the past year with both his post, and sense of humor, intact. It was clear from our discussion that most issues in the coming year will be colored by the 2006 parliamentary elections, as the various parties start to position themselves for the campaign. We do not expect this to detract from the transatlantic relationship or the Czech commitment to troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere, as there is strong U.S. support here across the political spectrum, but we should be prepared to hear increased rhetoric and see more caution in the months ahead. End comment.
CABANISS